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ABSTRACT

This article examines selected interactive behaviors and messages currently being communicated in the home and attempts to answer the question: To what extent does a child's response to social and moral incidents resemble or match the parent's response to the same situations? A set of episodes depicting social incidents involving children and adults was developed for administration to children and their parents. Each episode described a problematic situation that required adult intervention with a child or a group of children. Episodes involved problems with: (1) parent-as-witness to events; (2) accidental happenings, with parent at blame; (3) parent and child jointly sharing culpability or blame; and (4) accidental happenings, with neither child nor parent responsible. Responses on a scale ranging from "most permissive" to "least permissive" were gathered from 17 volunteer child/parent dyads. Children in the dyads were fourth-graders enrolled in a private school. Subjects were asked to indicate what they thought would happen next, whether they had ever seen the particular kind of event before, what the event was, and what the actions of the adult were. Findings indicated that responses to situations requiring acceptance or rejection of behaviors with embedded moral dimensions differed in terms of variance and congruence from situations with embedded social conventions. (RH)

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Messages Sent--Messages Received!
A Closer Look at Emerging Moral Behaviors

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One afternoon Tommy's mother heard him telling his younger brother that he was expecting a phone call from his friend, George. She heard him ask his younger brother to tell George that he was not at home. When she asked Tommy why he was asking his brother to make an untrue remark, he responded, "But Mom, sometimes, when people call Dad at night, I hear you tell them that he is not at home!" Tommy's mother was taken aback by his behavior and explanation. But, she was even more shaken by the realization that Tommy was obviously modeling or imitating the behavior he had learned from observing ever-so-innocent family incidents; a behavior based upon the idea or belief that "telling-stories," or "little-white-lies" is an acceptable practice.

Increasingly, events on the world and national scene are serving as models of behavior which appear to be based upon the idea that "telling-stories," or "little-white-lies" is an acceptable social practice. Attempts from our nation's highest administrative levels to explain and justify contradictive and ethically questionable actions pertaining to such events as the Iranian/Contra affair, and more recently, events in Central America, continue to add chapters to what may well become known as the Era of Mixed Messages. Messages containing many variations of truth and patterns of behavior, deliberately designed to misinform or misrepresent, are, quite obviously, coming to be perceived by many persons in authority as clever, efficient, and acceptable.

A growing trend toward a "leadership-by- confusion" style and a concern that such actions have become an acceptable form of public behavior prompted an exploration of selected antecedents of moral and

social behaviors as reflected in youngsters. Since children learn social conventions and basic morality from modeling behaviors of significant others (Turiel, 1983), a closer examination was initiated of some of the behaviors currently being exhibited in our nation's most basic social unit, the home. The following article examines selected interactive behaviors and messages currently being communicated in the home and answers the question: To what extent does a child's response to social and moral incidents resemble or match the parent's response to the same situations? Asked another way, to what extent is there is congruence between verbal and nonverbal messages sent by parents and the way children understand and reflect those messages in the course of their typical daily life interactions with others?

SURVEYING MESSAGES BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

A set of episodes depicting social incidents involving children and adults was developed and prepared for administration to children and their parents for gathering separate and individual reactions. The intent of this survey was not to form a judgment about the values reflected; but it was rather an effort to observe the degree of similarity or match between parent responses and child responses to the different episodes through independent observations.

Responses were gathered from seventeen child/parent dyads selected from fourth graders enrolled in a private school in a city of 100,000 in the southeast. Families enrolled in the school represented the upper 25 percent of the population both socio- economically and educationally. Dyads were selected from children and their parents who volunteered to be involved in the study. Information offered the parents prior to their volunteering emphasized only that the focus of the study

would be upon "message sending" between adults and children. Family identity was protected through a system of coding; neither researcher was personally acquainted with the families involved.

Each of the nine brief, simply structured episodes described a different type of problem-imbedded situation involving a child or a group of children requiring parent intervention. The episodes were shaped around common, natural events--the types of situations experienced from time to time in every home involved in the rearing of children: Telling untruths, ignoring rules, taking things not theirs, and mistreating others. For each episode, a value-informing response was required in the resolution. The episodes were designed to focus on situations related to both moral issues and social conventions. The episodes involved problems with 1) parent-as-witness to events; 2) accidental happenings, with parent at blame; 3) parent and child sharing joint-culpability or blame; and, 4) accidental happenings, with neither child or parent to blame.

The episodes were presented individually to both children and parents at independent administrations. The children were interviewed one-on-one by the authors. The parents, however, were permitted to complete the questionnaire on their own in independent, individual settings. Interviews with parents and children were conducted simultaneously or on the same day in order to prevent a premature sharing of the interview experience.

Children and parents responded to each of the episodes on a five-option continuum, ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "most permissive" and 5, "least permissive." A response of 5 also indicated that, perhaps, there is an established standard of behavior for this particular type of situation. Again, this survey did not attempt to form a value

judgment on the behaviors observed but rather focused on the degree of match across the responses of parents and children across all types of situations. In addition to selecting the response perceived to represent most closely what they would expect to experience in a real situation, both parents and children were asked "What they thought happened next," "whether they had ever seen that kind of thing happen before," "what was the event they had seen," and "what were the actions of the adult in the situation." In addition, parents were asked whether this kind of thing had ever happened to them and/or their child before. If so, what happened, and what the parent/child said and/or did. Likewise, children were asked whether this kind of thing had ever happened to them and their parents before. (A complete set of episodes is availabe from the authors).

RESPONSES

The nine episodes were grouped together into three categories in order to examine the responses. Group one, with four episodes, focused on the parent as witness to problem situations involving moral principles with children. There was an episode involving 1) the acceptance or tolerance of another cultural practice; 2) discrimination based on personal appearance; 3) the ignoring of rules or cheating in a game; and 4) taking something belonging to someone else or stealing. An analysis of data revealed in episodes where the parent observed or was witness to the problem and was required to respond, there was a high degree of match between the parents responses as to what the parent in the situation should say and/or do and the children's suggestions as to what the parent would say and/or do. The level of agreement was high across all four episodes in one group.

Interestingly, in Episode #8, pertaining to the tolerance of

another child's cultural practices, and Episode #6, pertaining to another child's personal appearance, the level of agreement between the parent and child responses to the situations was "not permissive." This indicates that for these behaviors there was a clearly established standard of behavior to be expected. In Episode #2, pertaining to taking something belonging to another, and Episode #3, related to ignoring the rules of a game, all but one parent and one child chose responses indicating a "non-permissive" standard of behavior. Overall in all four of these episodes, however, the responses selected suggest that for the children and parents in this study, there is clearly an established standard of behavior to be expected in the types of situations involving 1) the acceptance or tolerance of another cultural practice; 2) discrimination based on personal appearance; 3) the ignoring of rules or cheating in a game; and 4) taking something belonging to someone else or stealing.

In group two there were two episodes involving moral principles which focused on accidental situations involving children, parents, and money. In Episode #4, the parent was to blame, and in Episode #1, neither parent nor child was to blame. Each episode provided an opportunity for the parents to set an example of fair and ethical conduct concerning money For both episodes, data revealed a high level of match between the responses of children and parents. For Episode # 1, children and parents chose the "non- permissive" behavior as the appropriate standard except for one parent who chose the "neutral" position. This match in parent and child responses again suggests that, for the population involved in this inquiry, in cases of accidentally receiving or taking something not one's own, the acceptable behavior was "not permissive." In both instances there was a clearly established standard of

behavior to be expected.

Group three had three episodes which focused on social conventions in cases where a child and adult shared culpability or blame. Episodes #5 and #7 involved telling untruths, and Episode #9 involved a child's failure to follow through on a promise. In these situations both child and parent shared responsibility and/or blame for the nature of the final outcome. Data revealed that for the problems embedded in each of these situations, a greater range of responses of both children and the parents was reported.

Episode #5 reflected an incident in which both the child and the parent cooperated together, though unspoken, in creating a dishonest illusion. While 76% of the parents and 88% of the children chose the "non-permissive" standard of behavior as acceptable, the remaining parents and children remained "neutral" or suggested a "permissive" position. Similarly, in Episode #7, which focused upon another type of incident in which the child attempted to enlist the parent in being untruthful, even less (76%) of the parents but slightly more (94%) of the children chose a response indicating "non- permissive" as the appropriate behavior. The remaining parents and children chose a "neutral" or permissive" position. In Episode #9, pertaining to a child's failure to follow through on a promise, the highest percentage of parents and children indicated "non-permissive" behavior to the acceptable standard. However one parent and one child chose the "permissive" standard and one parent did not indicate a choice.

The wider range of responses may tend to suggest that a higher level of "permissiveness" is acceptable in these types of social situations. In other words, there may not be a clearly established and

expected standard of behavior in situations calling for mindful and deliberate actions toward truthfulness/untruthfulness and making and keeping promises.

MORALITY VS. SOCIAL CONVENTION

The literature on moral development of young children identifies a difference between development of moral concepts and social conventions. Moral concepts deal with behaviors and consequences that are based on acts resulting in harm to others, violations of rights, and effects on the general welfare of others (Nucci,1987). These moral concepts span across cultures and society and are not readily changed (Nucci,1987). Social conventions, on the other hand, are determined by factors inherent in social relationships, standard and acceptable forms of practice for a given society, and embedded in context. Social conventions can change and have a greater degree variability from culture to culture (Nucci,1987).

A clear pattern emerged from this survey that matches other investigations of moral development in young children (Nucci, 1987 and Turiel, 1983). The responses to situations requiring acceptance or rejection of behaviors with embedded **morality** issues; i.e., cheating, stealing, or the welfare of others; indicated less variance and strong congruence at the non-permissive level between parent and child. It appears in the episodes that the acceptable form of behaviors was to reflect what is fair and what is right based on basic morality.

The responses to situations requiring acceptance or rejection of behaviors with embedded **social conventions**; i.e., telling untruths or following through on promises in situations where the welfare of others was not in jeopardy; indicated more variance and less congruence between parent and child. It appears that in situations of social convention a

wider range of behaviors is acceptable for both parent and child and that parents are sending messages via their behavior that more permissiveness is acceptable.

CONCLUSION

While it is reassuring that the responses in this survey indicate that morality issues have less room for variance, for the teachers of young children it is unsettling that the issues involving the social conventions of telling untruths and following through on promises do allow for variance and permissiveness. Authorities advise teachers to be concerned with the moral development of young children and not confuse the issue of morality and social conventions (Nucci, 1987). Stealing, a issue of morality, is not on the same level as saying "thank you," a social convention. However, a clearer delineation between what is merely social convention and what is basic morality needs to be delineated. As stated at the beginning of this article, this era of "mixed messages" may be reflecting a major change in society and social conventions. Perhaps, as with all social conventions, leadership in government and parental modeling are changing what once was the acceptable social form of behavior in the areas of untruths and commitments.

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EPISODES FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Episode #1 **(accident)**

Ten-year-old Mark and 7-year-old Bobby went to the State Fair with their dad. While their dad parked the car, Mark went to the ticket window to buy their tickets. Mark gave the ticket seller a $10.00 bill. The tickets cost $3.00 each . Mark knew that he should receive one dollar in change. When the busy ticket seller gave him his change Mark moved quickly away from the ticket window. Then he noticed the man had given him a $5.00 bill instead of a $1.00 bill by mistake. When his dad and his brother joined him , Mark told his dad.

What do you think Mark's father said?

___ "Oh, Good! We'll have five extra dollars to spend!"

___ "It's all right! Just keep it!"

___ "It was his mistake! You didn't do anything wrong."

___ "Come on! We'll take it back. The ticket seller just made a mistake!"

___ "Why didn't you give it back? You know you can't keep it!"